

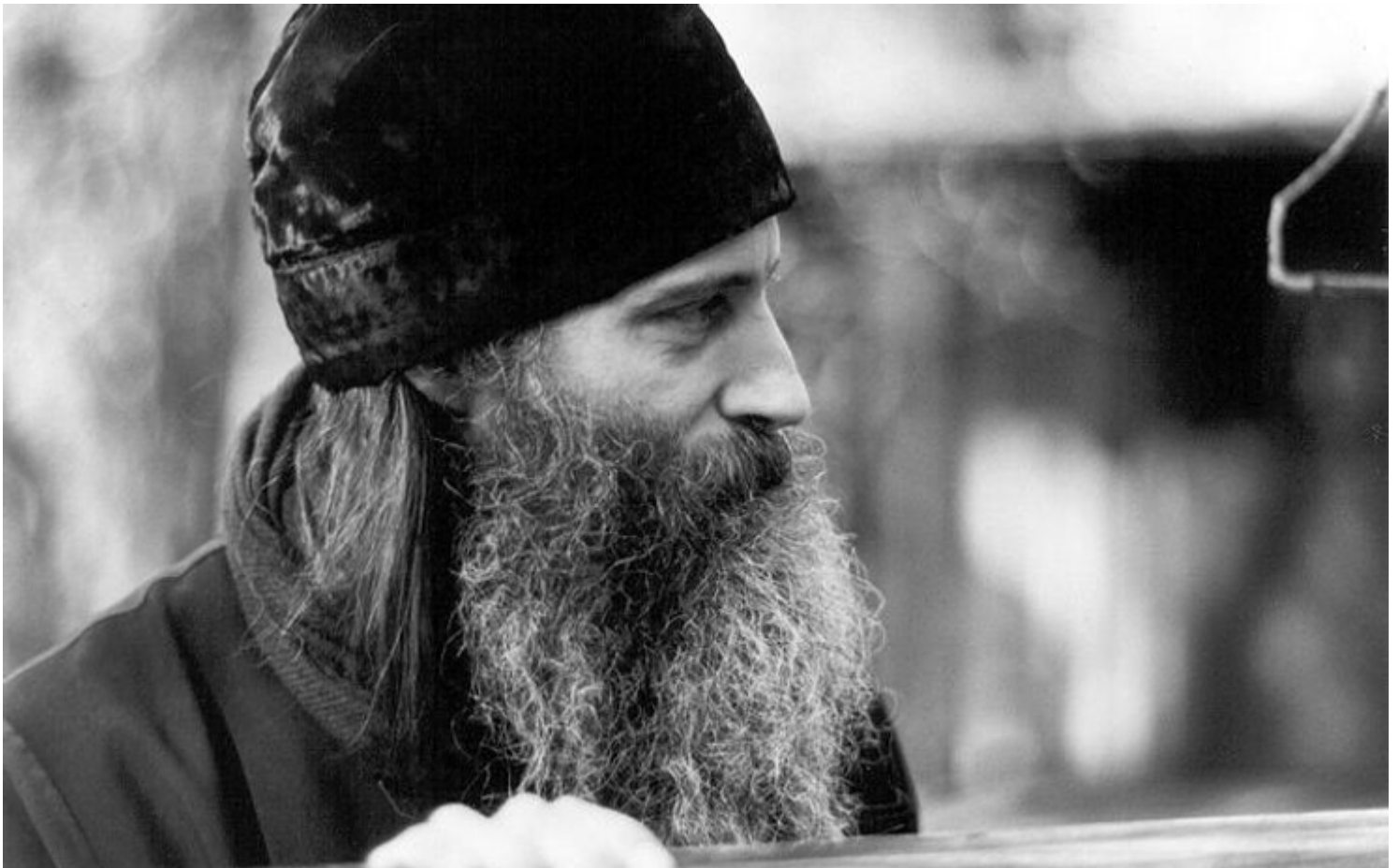


Subdeacon Nektarios, M.A. 🏰 17 minutes ago 11 min read

Father Seraphim Rose On Schmemmann & Meyendorff: The Pseudo-Patristic Scholars of Orthodoxy?

Subdeacon Nektarios, M.A.

For many who have converted to Holy Orthodoxy, some of the first names that they will hear when it comes to books to read are those produced by Alexander Schmemmann and John Meyendorff, two clergymen from the Metropolia (OCA). They are frequently spoken of as the preeminent theologians of the Orthodox Church and you will often hear people boast that they have studied under them or remark that they were the “greatest Church historians of the twentieth century.” This is frequently the narrative promulgated by those who have come from the circles at Saint Vladimir and Saint Tikhon Seminaries.



Blessed Father Seraphim (Rose)

However, we have to ask, are these kinds of statements about these specific clergymen necessarily accurate or is this just what has been commonly accepted because they are the authors of many books and taught at these specific schools? As Father Seraphim Rose has stated in Letter 306, “St. Vladimir’s Seminary is not very conducive to keeping or developing any kind of traditional Orthodoxy” [1]. To get a more well-rounded view of how these two “theologians” were received during their contemporary time we can look at the writings of Father Seraphim (Rose) and Father Michael Pomazansky of Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, who wrote frequently about them in their own letters that circulated within the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. Within these letters, Schmemmann is referenced fifty-two times and Meyendorff thirty-three different times, usually in reference to their problematic writings, publications, and innovative theology.

The first mention of Schmemmann in the letters of Father Seraphim, which span from 1961 to 1982, is from Letter 30, written March 16/29, 1970, to a Father Photios. In this letter Father Seraphim is writing Father Photios about producing written material and Orthodox publications for the faithful and says that the Orthodox Christians in America are in desperate need of the lives of the Saints in English so that they can be saved from academic pseudo-Orthodoxy. In this letter Father Seraphim writes:

Lives of Saints are one thing desperately needed in America to give a dose of real Orthodoxy for those withering away from the two-dimensional academic Orthodoxy of Schmemmann and the new “autocephalous” monstrosity. [...] The American Orthodox public is so undernourished with printed food that it has to be educated to know what it should read. The “official” press—*Young Life*, *Upbeat*, *Concern*, the learned quarterlies—is actually poisoning the Orthodox public and stunting their appetites; and now with the “autocephaly,” they will make a big point of trying to persuade everyone that this is what they should be reading. We are a minority and will have a hard time persuading many that they should be eating real food and not TV dinners [2].

In this first reference, Father Seraphim brings up the problematic “academic Orthodoxy” of Schmemmann, in which the American Orthodox *milieu* is frequently promoted as the “golden standard” of Orthodox Christianity in the United States. However, in other letters we will see that one of the main problems with both Schmemmann and Meyendorff according to Father Seraphim is the *phronema* [mindset] of these two Metropolia clergymen. In Letter 37, Bright Saturday, April 19/May 2, 1970, Father Seraphim (Rose) writing to another Father Seraphim gives us more insight as to what kind of *phronema* was prevalent within the Metropolia of the period, how the Metropolia was in schism from the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad and references some problematic writings that Meyendorff addressed to the Hierarchs of ROCOR. In this letter Father Seraphim writes:

These three men are traitors to Orthodoxy, on the same level (although more refined) as Patr. Athenagoras and Archbp. Iakovos, and it is time that the Orthodox faithful be informed of this. Archbp. John Shahovskoy for 40 years has been preaching a “poetical” Christianity that is against monasticism and every kind of strict Orthodoxy; Fr. Schmemmann is clearly attempting to Protestantize Orthodoxy; and Fr. Meyendorff, by his irresponsible and slanderous attack against the hierarchs and faithful of the Russian Church Abroad (in the Feb. *Orthodox Church*) shows himself so anxious to follow in their footsteps that he departs even from ordinary honesty and fairness. These men are clearly leading the Metropolia into “Eastern-rite Protestantism,” and now the Metropolia hierarchs have unanimously joined with the enemies of Christ’s Church [Moscow Patriarchate] in order to speed up this aim—it is too late to do anything for the Metropolia, anyone who wishes to remain in Christ’s Church must leave her now before being caught in her snares [3].

In Letter 38 by Father Seraphim, he writes about his work at the *Orthodox Word* and how they are planning to publish works that will identify some of those major figures at the time of writing who are departing from traditional Orthodox Christianity. Father Seraphim in this letter mentions that Father Michael Pomazansky, a Russian theologian from Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, New York, was writing a public article addressing some of the heretical texts being written by Schmemmann. Father Seraphim, writing to Father Michael Azkoul says:

With the March-April *Orthodox Word* we are beginning an occasional series of articles on “Renovated Orthodoxy,” in which we hope to pinpoint some of the leading currents and figures that are trying to lead Orthodoxy off the straight and narrow traditional path into positions that, if not always identifiable as heresy, are nonetheless no longer Orthodox. The first article, by a leading Russian theologian, Fr. Michael Pomazansky, points out the Protestantism of Fr. A. Schmemmann’s “liturgical theology” [4].

As we can see, as early as 1970, Father Seraphim and those within the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad recognized that Schmemann and Meyendorff were both identified as problematic figures, promulgating pseudo-Orthodoxy, renovationism, heresy in their writings, and they belonged to a schismatic body. In Letter 51 to Father David Black, Father Seraphim further discusses Schmemann and the entire situation concerning the Metropolia receiving their false autocephaly from the Soviet Moscow Patriarchate in March of 1970. Father Seraphim writing to Father David Black, says at length:

Dear Father David [Black],

What is there to say: The Metropolia has gone through with its coup, which for the present involves only itself, but obviously has possibilities for a future union of all those who think a “unified Orthodox Church” is the answer for American Orthodoxy. No, it is not the answer, and is the product of very superficial thinking on the question. The answer is a return to real Orthodoxy, so sorely diluted in this century in America. The Metropolia move, I believe, is the watershed of 20th-century Orthodoxy—from now on there will be two “Orthodoxies” in America: the real one (of which no one can doubt that our Synod has become the beacon-light) and the imitation, the product of the Protestantized-academicized Paris school joined to the practical indifference and secular Protestantism of American life. The proof of the case against the Metropolia (and the other like-thinking jurisdictions) lies not in its dubious tactics or even its criminal negotiations with the Soviets, but in the fact that its leadership is not preaching Orthodoxy but a cheap surrogate thereof.

Yes, some priests still try, but the future belongs to Frs. Schmemann and Meyendorff, who are not Orthodox, and the future generation is being raised on the blasphemous parody of Orthodoxy contained in the official publications, from *Young Life* to *Concern*. These people doubtless mean well, but they have been drastically miseducated, and now they try to enforce their abysmal ignorance of Orthodoxy upon the whole Church. We assumed, in our last letter to Bp. Theodosius, that he would understand that unity with the Synod involves rejection of Moscow and vice versa. It is not only Metr. Anastassy but our own Archbp. Anthony of San Francisco and many other hierarchs who have pleaded for the restoration of this unity, to which the Metropolia always turned a deaf ear.

Now, of course, the Metropolia's [OCA] schism is complete, and no further communion is possible. But now we may at least thank God that the air has been somewhat cleared, and those still able to choose can do so. The issues are critical: Orthodoxy vs. non-Orthodoxy. In worldly terms the Metropolia has all the odds on its side: numbers, prestige, publication of wide circulation with an editor who, frankly, is not to be accused of fairness or honesty. But the Metropolia does not have principle or truth on her side, nor can she be considered any longer as within the Church. The official representatives of the Metropolia either do not know the facts of Church history of the last 50 years (Fr. Schmemmann has admitted to Fr. Michael Azkoul that he doesn't know the facts about the Synod!) or else they are deliberately distorting them. The "ship" of the Metropolia, as a Church, has come to shipwreck; from now on individuals can still be rescued, but the judgment of the whole body can only be given over to the free Russian Church of the future.

The Synod's position of truth and principle, of what Orthodoxy is and what it is not, will be presented in detail in future publications. Our *Orthodox Word* will soon print Fr. Michael Azkoul's excellent reply to Fr. Schmemmann's attack on the "Sorrowful Epistle" (Fr. Meyendorff turned it down, predictably), in the hope of setting straight Fr. Schmemmann's distortions and faulty theology. Fr. Michael has now come to the Synod—not because he thinks that Metr. Philip is a heretic, but because in not breaking off with Moscow over the issue of giving communion to Roman Catholics he enters also into crypto-Uniatism, as the Metropolia already has done far more decisively.

"Global Orthodoxy" has not listened to the Synod's pleas, and therefore those who wish to remain Orthodox have no choice but to leave "global Orthodoxy." In the 15th century those who were not with St. Mark of Ephesus were not in the Church—and this situation is being approached today. Alas, the basic Church issues of today are disguised in clouds of rhetoric and academic half-truths. The capitulation of Orthodoxy today comes not in the forms of signatures to a pseudo-Union, but as a gradual series of acts of apostasy. Those who love the truth must now separate themselves from this relentless and soul-destroying process. The Church as seen through the eyes of the Metropolia presents a timid voice to the world, ever ready to apologize for its deviations and to accommodate itself to the times and to the powerful of the world. Not such is the Church of Christ! And there is precious little time left for us to thunder the truth to an indifferent world! [5]

In another text published by Father Seraphim from *The Orthodox Word* he writes concerning the so-called academic theologians and scholars saying:

When “Orthodox” scholars pick up the teaching of these pseudo-patristic scholars or make their own researches in the same rationalistic spirit, the outcome can be tragic; for such scholars are taken by many to be “spokesmen for Orthodoxy,” and their rationalistic pronouncements to be part of an “authentically patristic” outlook, thus deceiving many Orthodox Christians. Father Alexander Schmemmann, for example, while pretending to set himself free from the “Western captivity” which, in his ignorance of the true patristic tradition of recent centuries (which is to be found more in the monasteries than in the academies), he fancies to have completely dominated Orthodox theology in modern times, has himself become the captive of Protestant rationalistic ideas concerning liturgical theology, as has been well pointed out by Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky, a genuine patristic theologian of today [6].

In *The Liturgical Theology of Father A. Schmemmann*, which is a response to a problematic text produced by Schmemmann, Father Michael Pomazansky writes in his conclusion saying:

We have dealt with the book of Father A. Schmemmann in full detail because in the future a liturgical dogmatics text may be given to Orthodox readers based on the views presented in this book. If the foundation is so dubious, can we be convinced that the building erected on them will be sound? We do not at all negate the Western historico-liturgical and theological science and its objective value. We cannot manage entirely without it. We acknowledge its merits. But we cannot blindly trust the conclusions of Western historians. If we speak of worship as members of the Orthodox Church, the principle of understanding the history of our worship and its current status by which the Church Herself lives should be present. This principle diverges fundamentally from Western Protestant attitudes. If we have not understood this principle, our efforts should be directed to discovering it, understanding it.

The logic of history tells us that in public life departures from a straight path occur as the consequence of changes in principles and ideas. If we maintain the Orthodox Symbol of Faith, if we confess that we stand on the right dogmatic path, we should not doubt that both the direction of Church life and the structure of worship which was erected on the foundation of our Orthodox confession of faith, are faultless and true. We cannot acknowledge that our “liturgical piety,” after a series of regenerations, has gone far, far away from the spirit of Apostolic times. If we observe a decline in piety, a failure to understand the Divine services, the reason for this lies outside the Church: it is in the decline of faith in the masses, in the decline of morality, in the loss of Church consciousness. But where Church consciousness and piety are preserved, there is no rebirth in the understanding of Christianity. We accept the Gospel and Apostolic Scriptures not in a refraction through some kind of special prism, but in their immediate, straightforward sense. We are convinced that our public prayer is based on the very same dogmatic and psychological foundations on which it was made in Apostolic and ancient Christian times, notwithstanding the difference in forms of worship.

Is Father Alexander Schmemmann prepared to acknowledge that in fact the character of *his* piety is different from the character of the piety of the ancient Church? [7].

Father Seraphim realizing “the terrible lie of Schmemmann and that whole fake Orthodoxy” [6] recognizes how both Schmemmann and Meyendorff are perceived differently among those of the Orthodox-born Russians versus those who have converted to Holy Orthodoxy in the United States. Father Seraphim writes in Letter 45 to Father Michael Azkoul saying,

Many thanks for your letter. First of all—yes, we would most certainly like to see your answer to Fr. Schmemmann, the sooner the better. We might even be able to substitute it for our already-prepared article on Fr. Schmemmann’s “liturgical theology,” which has no particular timeliness—depending on length. We ourselves thought of writing something by way of reply to that, as also to Fr. Meyendorff’s attack in *Orthodox Church*, but we couldn’t find the time and concentration, and then Fr. George Grabbe’s replies came out. Fr. Grabbe’s replies, while always sober and factual, are really addressed to Russians who can’t get excited about people like *Frs. Schmemmann & Meyendorff because they’ve long recognized them as apostates* and just don’t listen to them anymore. But for English-speaking people [American Converts] there should be a more fighting approach, I think; *in English these people are “theological authorities,” and it’s up to us to prove that they aren’t* [7].

In these letters of Father Seraphim and the writing of Father Michael Pomazansky we can see the historical reality that existed within this period of Orthodoxy concerning Schmemmann and Meyendorff. It is quite clear that Schmemmann and Meyendorff were not looked to as authoritative either historically or theologically by anyone within the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia of old. These two pseudo-patristic scholars were considered not only schismatics, because of their membership in the Metropolia which was born out of schism [8] from the canonical Russian Orthodox Church Abroad but were also theological renovationists according to Father Seraphim and Father Michael Pomazansky.

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- [3]. Father Seraphim (Rose) to Father Seraphim, Letter 37, Platina, California (April 19/May 2, 1970).
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- [6]. Father Seraphim Rose, "The Holy Fathers of Orthodox Spirituality Part I. The Inspiration and Sure Guide to True Christianity Today" [orthodoxinfo.com](http://orthodoxinfo.com/phronema/rose_mind1.aspx), accessed August 25st, 2023, http://orthodoxinfo.com/phronema/rose_mind1.aspx
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- [9]. Father Seraphim (Rose) to Father Michael Azkoul, Letter 45, Platina, California (May 10/23, 1970).

[10]. Michael Rodzianko, *The Truth About the Russian Church Abroad*, trans. Michale Hilko (Jordanville: Print Shop of St Job of Pochaev, 1975), 21-40. [Read Here](#)